

An interview with Ray Gosnell ①

RAY GOSNELL

An Interview Conducted by

Darlene Norman

July 27, 1981

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# NARRATOR DATA SHEET

July 27, 1981

DATE

Name of narrator: Ray Gosnell

Address: Rte. 1, Box 13, Clinton, IN 47842 Phone: Area 317 832-6320

Birthdate: \_\_\_\_\_ Birthplace: \_\_\_\_\_

Length of residence in Terre Haute: \_\_\_\_\_

Education: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupational history: Telegrapher for the Chicago & Eastern Illinois Railroad from 1928 until 1972.

Special interests, activities, etc. Vice president of the Terre Haute chapter of the Morse Telegraph Club, Inc., Terre Haute (only such club incorporated in Indiana).

Major subject(s) of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

No. of tapes: 1 Length of interview: 1 hr. 15 min.

Terms of legal agreement: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewing sessions:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Interviewer</u>
July 27, 1981		Gosnell's home	Darlene Norman

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RAY GOSNELL

Tape 1

July 27, 1981

Mr. Gosnell's residence--Route 1, Box 13, Clinton, IN 47842

INTERVIEWER: Darlene Norman

TRANSCRIBER: Kathleen M. Skelly

For: Vigo County Oral History Program

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DN: Today is July the 27th. I am interviewing Ray Gosnell in his home at Rural Route 1, Box 13, Clinton, Indiana.

Ray, were you born here in Clinton or where were you born?

GOSNELL: Yeah. I was born right here on this same corner.

DN: In this house.

GOSNELL: Yeah. On June 29, 1908.

DN: Did your dad work here in Clinton or did he go into Terre Haute?

GOSNELL: Well, he was a farm boy to start with. And then he became a schoolteacher and my mother . . . incidentally she died two-and-a-half years after I was born. She died at Union Hospital.

My dad went home and he became a schoolteacher then.

DN: Here in Clinton.

GOSNELL: In Clearview Park, just right across the street from where I was born. So, he was running a store there on that same location. He built a store there and ran that, and he died there in 1924.

I didn't graduate from high school in Clinton until 1925. That same year, I went to Indiana State University and took summer courses down there.

DN: How did you get to Indiana State?

GOSNELL: How did I get there?

DN: Um hm.

GOSNELL: Well, I went on the interurban every day.

DN:                   What was the cost of the interurban then?

GOSNELL:           Well, I took advantage of the mileage ticket that they sold. They sold a ticket that was good for a hundred miles for a dollar and a quarter. And when you got on the car, the motorman . . . or the conductor marked off 15 spaces -- 15 miles -- on that ticket. And what it was costing you then was 15¢ and a quarter or 15¢ which would be . . . you might say 18¢ was the fare to Terre Haute. And at the same time if you wanted one, you could get a transfer which was good on any of the lines in Terre Haute. Now, for instance, you didn't have to go clear downtown to the 9th and Wabash Avenue terminal before you got off the car. You could get off every other block. Any place the car stopped you could get off.

DN:                   Did you pull a buzzer or anything to make the car stop? Or did you just . . . there were designated stops you had to get off at?

GOSNELL:           Well, regardless of where you wanted off, they just had designated stops that was every other block. And that was the only place you could get off, you see, of course. But . . .

DN:                   Did it stop in the middle of the road and then you'd have to cross?

GOSNELL:           Yeah. Yeah, it was in the middle of the street. From North Terre Haute it came up Lafayette Avenue, and then there at Twelve Points it turned south on 13th Street. And it crossed the tracks . . . well, it would be about . . . well, I forget the name of that street now, but it would be four or five blocks north of Wabash Avenue.

DN:                   Chestnut?

GOSNELL:           No, it was even north of that yet.

DN:                   It was north of Chestnut.

GOSNELL:           Three blocks north.

DN:                   Locust?

GOSNELL: Spruce probably, see.

And then when you got to whatever line intersected with that line . . . for instance, if you wanted to go out to Highland Lawn cemetery, why you could get off, walk across the street, and catch the city car that went to Highland Lawn. Or if you wanted to go to West Terre Haute, why you'd just go on uptown. And when you got uptown /you'd/ get on the car that went to West Terre Haute.

DN: And you had a transfer, right?

GOSNELL: All on that transfer. Or you could transfer to South 7th Street or South 3rd Street or . . . There was a South 17th Street car that went down 13th and jogged over after it got down there a ways, jogged over and then it went down 17th Street. Or if you wanted to go north, you could go up to North 19th to Maple or to North 14th and Maple or to Collett Park on 8th Street, see. You could go practically anywhere in Terre Haute. And then when they put the buses on along about 1925, possibly '26, they had two or three bus routes. And one bus route . . . well, it started at the courthouse, you might say, and it went east on Ohio Street, angled around and it wound up on South 25th Street. It went clear to . . . oh, probably Hulman Street and then turned and went west and went over to . . . I believe it was 9th Street. And then came north and angled its way into the courthouse again. At the same time there was a bus left on that route, there was a bus that left on the reverse of it. So that if you lived out in 25th and Franklin, say, well, you could take whichever bus came along at the same time -- either the northbound bus or the southbound bus, whichever one came first you could take that one -- and get uptown at approximately the same time, see.

DN: Now, what were bus fares like then? Same as the interurban?

GOSNELL: Well, the same as the streetcar fare. I believe it was seven cents. But anyway you could . . . if you were coming in from Clinton, you'd use your transfer, see.

DN: How big were the buses?

GOSNELL: Oh, they would accommodate 20 [to 30] people.

DN: Now, when the buses began after the trolley cars, did they take business away from the trolley cars?

GOSNELL: Well . . .

DN: Or did they share it?

GOSNELL: No, I wouldn't say at first they took business away from the trolley cars. They went hand in hand. It gave people a choice. Maybe they'd go part of the way on the bus and part of the way on a trolley car, see. But the bus was more flexible. If something happened, like to the track on a trolley (of course, it seldom happened but it did sometimes) . . . like in all the years that I traveled with the interurban line -- and I was due in Terre Haute either to school or to work at 7 o'clock in the morning -- I never missed . . . I never missed a morning and I was never late, see.

DN: That's wonderful. How often did they come? The interurban?

GOSNELL: Well, the first bus . . . or the first car left Clinton at 5:45 in the morning, and the last one at night left Clinton at 11 o'clock. It was the 10 o'clock car out of Terre Haute which got up there at 11, you see, and then it came back. And then it tied up. And then there was a period of about three hours or four there that the streetcars didn't operate. That gave them a chance to work on them in the car barns. And then the first thing in the morning there'd be a car that left Terre Haute at 4 o'clock in the morning . . . No, let's see. It'd be 4:30 in the morning. The first car out of Terre Haute would come to Clinton and leave Clinton at 5:45 [a.m.]. Now, ordinarily they'd leave Clinton on the hour. But it left 15 minutes early to accommodate the ones that were working or going to school, so we could get whatever in time for a 7 o'clock class or whatever, see.

DN: Um hm. How long did it take to travel that distance? How fast were they going?

GOSNELL: Well, they were traveling . . . top speed was about 45 miles an hour. But most of it wasn't open country. They didn't make too many stops out in the middle of nowhere, see. Once in a while they did.

DN: Were there trains going yet at this period?

GOSNELL: Yeah. But you see there were six passenger trains a day that came through Terre Haute, also. But their business was geared more for the through traffic and mail and express, such as that to take care of, see.

DN: Did the interurban have to cross their train lines . . . their rail lines? That's what I was wondering, whether you'd have to make stops for the train to go on . . . did the tracks crisscross?

GOSNELL: Yes. They did. And, of course, in that day the trains were shorter. And the personnel that would maintain the tracks, they had to live close to their job. If anything happened, somebody had to be available to take care of it quickly, see. Now, for instance, the last 15 years that I worked on the railroad, I worked at Haley Tower. That was at 13 $\frac{1}{2}$  and Beech, there where Chesty /Foods/ used to be. Well, now the man that took care of that interlocking plant as we called it . . . that was an electric plant, and because of that we'd have breakdowns and blew fuses and things that way, see. Because for that very reason that we might have streetcars tied up and whatnot and the gates would be down and, you know, just everything would be going wrong.

DN: Was there a certain section then of Terre Haute that people who worked on the railroad or streetcars lived?

GOSNELL: Well, they just had to live close to their job. That was all. As they possibly could, see.

DN: Would it be near the yards or near a stop?

GOSNELL: Well, it was wherever their job was, why that

GOSNELL: was where they had to be so they could get there quickly, see.

DN: O.K.

GOSNELL: And I've gone when I worked night jobs and I'd have trouble on the plant, why I'd grab the lantern and then go over to get this man . . . well, I can't think of his name now. It's really an odd name. But anyway, I would go to his house. He lived four houses down Beech Street from the plant, see. I'd knock on the door and get him up, get him over there to take care of it, see. And it didn't happen too often, but then they understood that. And . . . in fact they weren't even supposed to leave town. A maintainer was not supposed to leave town unless he notified the company so that they could have somebody else cover his territory, see.

DN: Right.

O.K. Let's go back to your going in to school at Indiana State on interurban. Can you tell us a little bit what . . . was that Indiana State Normal then? What the school was like at the time?

GOSNELL: Well, I forget whether that was the official title or not. It probably was. But all I went for was to pick up some courses that I really should have taken when I was in high school but for some reason or other I just didn't do it. I thought, well, as long as I didn't have a job right then, why I would just continue my education and not waste any time and go ahead and take 'em. Like solid geometry, that was one of the things that I lacked in taking a college preparatory course, see.

DN: Was that Stalker Hall then that you . . . the one great big huge building . . .

GOSNELL: Well, it was in the old building, that one big building.

DN: Right, that's Stalker /Old Main, not Stalker/.

GOSNELL: And . . .

DN: Did most of the students come from the surrounding area out by interurban or streetcar?



GOSNELL: Well, most of them roomed in town if they didn't live in Terre Haute. Of course, a lot of them had relatives in Terre Haute. Of course, I did, too. But you know, I hadn't gotten away from the idea of staying at home, so I just went back and forth. It didn't cost much. And so I found out what it was like to commute back and forth. And, like I said, I never missed a class and the next year I was working and . . .

DN: Did you begin working . . .

GOSNELL: . . . never missed any jobs, never lost any time on account of being late or anything. That was one thing. The interurbans were dependable. You could depend on them.

DN: Now, did you begin working for the C. & E. I. -- Chicago and Eastern Illinois -- right away or did you have another job first?

GOSNELL: No, I had another job. I started working for Fred Coffman -- C-o-double f-m-a-n. He was one of the main owners of the . . . oh, can't think of it now, an electric company. It was at 1000 South 10th Street. The Empire Electric Company at 1000 South 10th Street which now . . . that is part of the Stran Steel Corporation. That's not in existence any more, that location, see. But I knew several people around that area, and everything's gone. The people, of course, have moved out and made way for Stran Steel.

DN: What kind of area was that then?

GOSNELL: Well, it was just right across the street . . .

DN: Residential?

GOSNELL: It was residential, see. And on the corner here was this Empire Electric Company -- Empire Electric and Machine. And it had about half a dozen persons working in the shop. And, of course, I was an apprentice. And that was one thing that I had always wanted to learn was industrial electricity, see. And right there I got to learn what I wanted to know. I got paid for it.

DN: What were wages back then?

GOSNELL:           Hm?

DN:                What were wages like back then?

GOSNELL:           Well, how do you mean?

DN:                How much did you get paid? Was it . . .

GOSNELL:           Well, (laughs) I got paid the wonderful sum  
of 25 cents an hour.

DN:                (laughs) Did you commute yet?

GOSNELL:           Forty hours a week.

DN:                And were you still commuting?

GOSNELL:           Yeah. Yeah. Only after I was there a while,  
why then I did, for a while, stay at my cousin's  
in Terre Haute.

DN:                What was downtown like at the time? Was it  
a busy place with lots of people coming and going?

GOSNELL:           You mean the town?

DN:                Uh-huh.

GOSNELL:           Well, yeah. There were a lot of things hap-  
pening. There was a lot of street paving going on.  
And like I said, the streetcar system which was  
owned by the Terre Haute Electric Company which  
supplied the electricity for the city, it was  
putting buses on. They started their buses at  
number 1,000 and then they got up to 1,010, I be-  
lieve it was, before I quit riding on the buses.  
I never noticed how far they went after that.

DN:                Um hm. Did you ever go to the theater --  
vaudeville or any of the shows?

GOSNELL:           Yeah. Yeah, I used to go to the old Hippo-  
drome when it was first opened. It was nothing  
but vaudeville. It changed the bill, I think,  
twice a week. And then occasionally they would  
have just straight drama, you know. And maybe  
it would be . . . maybe it would last all week,  
the same show -- something like that. And it  
was real good. And I also remember when the  
Indiana Theater opened. It was about . . . oh,

GOSNELL: probably 1921, maybe 1922. I wouldn't swear it one way or the other. But I remember sitting on South 7th Street in the car between Wabash Avenue and Ohio Street and looking down there as the workmen were putting the finishing touches on to the marquee and one thing /and/ another. And I remember Terre Haute's first radio station, how there was a little flap about that. Of course, there was a lot of . . . if you want to call it the first radio station -- the broadcasting station, see, or what. Of course, there were a few hams around. But one of their first attempts anyway at public broadcasting was from the old Odd Fellows Building on South 8th Street. Do you know that building?

DN: Right. Um hm.

GOSNELL: Now, they had the antenna out on the roof, of course -- on top -- and you could see that. And I . . .

DN: Now was this WBOW?

GOSNELL: No.

DN: No. This is before?

GOSNELL: No. There wasn't WBOW yet. And I forget what the call was. It was . . .

DN: Was that the electric company? I know Joe Walker . . .

GOSNELL: Well, it may have been. It seems to me like . . . seems to me like Dr. Moench from . . .

DN: O.K. Rose Poly.

GOSNELL: . . . Rose Poly was connected with that somehow.

DN: Right. O.K.

GOSNELL: I don't remember exactly how it was but well, he was always interested in most anything novel that way. And, of course, that was, you know. And he had something to do with it. But he comes to our Morse telegraph club meetings, too.

DN: Um hm. Now, this was at the Odd Fellows building?

GOSNELL: Yeah. Um hm. That's a kind of a blond brick building on the east side . . .

DN: That's on Ohio and . . .

GOSNELL: Yeah, just north of Ohio Street on 8th.

DN: Right.

Now, did they . . . was this regular programming or did it just come on a few hours a day?

GOSNELL: Oh, I think . . . I think maybe it just came on, at first, maybe just an hour or two a week. I mean it was, you know, very small. It was just a . . . just more or less a test effort, see, to see how far it could be heard and one thing and another like that.

DN: I imagine very few people had radios to listen to it.

GOSNELL: That's right. And my dad had one of the first ones in Clinton. In fact, I know positively of only two other people that even had radios that could listen to it, see. And when he bought his radio, well, it was assembled. He got a tuner in one place, and he went to somebody else that had a detector and and then he bought an amplifier somewhere else. And then on to this amplifier he put a little strip where we could put on three headphones -- three sets of headphones -- at the same time. Because everybody wanted to hear what everybody else was listening to, see.

DN: About what year was this?

GOSNELL: What was what?

DN: What year?

GOSNELL: Well, I'd say that was 1922 . . . '22 and '23 probably. But now in the daytime at that time the only station that was available was WDZ over in Tuscola, Illinois. That had enough power and that clear shot . . . You see, there was nothing -- no interference -- between there and Clinton, nothing to cause mechanical noise or electrical noise. And you may not believe this but it is true, there was a period of six months or more that every

GOSNELL: radio station in the country -- every broadcasting station in the country -- was on the same wave length, 360 meters. That was the way they were styled in that time. And, for instance now between my dad and I, in order to separate the stations at night (they would come in KDKA from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and KYW Chicago and different ones) . . . if they were in the same area, the only way you could possibly sort them out would be to switch antennas, use different antennas. And one would pick up one and reject the other, see. And like that . . .

DN: Different directions?

GOSNELL: Yeah, that would provide your separation, see. And even today . . . even with your different wave lengths and everything, the best separation of all is just simply to have the set that will reject one signal and accept the other, see. That's the difference between a good set and an average set, I mean. It is that rejection.

But the first . . . as far as I know the first station that was commercial was WBOW. At that time their studio was on South 6th Street in the Root's store upstairs. The reason I say that is because I went up there.

DN: Oh, really?

GOSNELL: Once a week I'd broadcast over there.

DN: Doing what kind of broadcasting?

GOSNELL: Oh, there was a bunch of us had accordians and called ourselves the "Accordian Aces." And we broadcast over there every Sunday afternoon for a half hour. And that was 1930, '31, '32.

DN: Now you . . .

GOSNELL: That was in the Depression days, you know.

DN: What was it like during the Depression as long as we're . . .

GOSNELL: Well, it didn't all go out at once. I mean

GOSNELL: it just gradually just faded away, see. But in some areas. . . it probably stayed around here as long as anywhere; and I would say that in the Terre Haute area, it lasted until almost 1940. And it began in 1928, see.

I started to work for the railroads on August 11, 1928, and there was five others hired as telegraphers when I did. All but two of them quit, and there was ten years there they never hired a man.

DN: That's a long time.

GOSNELL: Ten years. They never let me go. They hung onto me.

DN: Did wages drop or remain the same at the time?

GOSNELL: Well, they let me have my pass. They kept me on seniority list; I didn't lose seniority. One year I only worked four days on the railroad.

DN: In one year?

GOSNELL: Yeah.

DN: Oh, my!

GOSNELL: But they called me and I came, see. And they told me, they said, "Now, we realize that you'd starve to death if you didn't have a job besides the railroad." They said, "Whenever we call for you and you're able to come," they said, "you come and we'll keep you on our list as long as we possibly can." So they did.

DN: What did you do in the meantime then?

GOSNELL: Hmm?

DN: What work did you do in the meantime while . . . since you were only working four days? Four days a year.

GOSNELL: Oh, a little of everything. That was how I got into the newspaper game. I don't know if you knew I was ever in that or not.

DN:                Yeah. When I called The Clintonian, I found out that you worked for the newspaper.

GOSNELL:          Well, . . .

DN:                Now, did you work for the . . . only Clinton's newspaper or for Terre Haute . . . .

GOSNELL:          No, not then. Not then. But you know we had a lot of strikes around at one time and another and what the coal miners called "wildcat strikes," see. They were unauthorized by the union. One evening I was . . . I knew that they were having trouble and I was out in my front yard . . .

DN:                This was in Terre Haute?

GOSNELL:          No, in Clinton.

DN:                In Clinton.

GOSNELL:          And I saw a car go by west and I thought to myself, well, now there's not a person in that car that I know. And it looks like there's some guns in there. So I watched them and they turned the corner; and in just a minute or so I heard shots, see. So, in just another minute or two here came that car back. So I got busy and I called the Terre Haute Star and told them what I'd seen and heard. The man that used to be the managing editor up until Mr. [Lawrence] Sawyer came . . . did you know who that was? I've forgotten his name now. [James R. Benham]

DN:                No, but I can check it.

GOSNELL:          Well, anyway he was . . . he was the man I talked to some. And he said, "Well, you keep us informed of what you see and what you hear; and if you want to, go around to some of the other mining camps around and see what you can find out and let us know. We won't use your name in any way, but," he says, "you won't be sorry you did."

So, the funny thing about it was that I was already a friend of John Cronin, who was the managing editor of the Tribune and Marsee Cox, who was the . . . well, I don't know. I guess his title . . . he really was state editor. But I

GOSNELL: knew them. So, I ended up for about ten years there I was correspondent for the Star and Tribune, too.

DN: Did they know that you were doing for both?

GOSNELL: Well, (laughs) the Star claimed that they didn't know. Later on, see.

DN: Uh-huh. Because I didn't think you were allowed to do for two newspapers.

GOSNELL: Yeah.

DN: At the time.

GOSNELL: They were politically, you see, at odds.

DN: Right.

GOSNELL: So . . .

DN: Around what years was this now?

GOSNELL: Hmm?

DN: What years?

GOSNELL: Well, this was leading up to World War II. Did you ever meet Sid Silverman?

DN: No.

GOSNELL: Well, he was a Clinton boy, see. And that was the whole thing. They wanted to officially make somebody correspondent for both papers, see. And I mean I wouldn't . . . I wasn't caring as far as that was concerned. And Sid was a good friend of mine, and we would help one another out -- fill in for one another if it came to that. So, Sid was the guy that they had picked, see, and he wanted to get married and so they decided on Sid. And when they . . . now this guy that's the sports editor now for channel 10. What's his name? /Richard Forbes/ I believe he was sports editor of the Star at that time.

Well anyway . . . it doesn't make any difference . . . but anyway he came to my house. And I wasn't there. I was away working someplace and he



GOSNELL: talked to my wife. And he said, "You know," he says, "we want to combine the jobs and have the one person responsible for both. We want to run an office in Clinton." And my wife says, "Why, that would be nice." And so (laughs) she and he got to talking, you know, and he talked like they'd never had that before. And she says, "Why, (laughs) you've had that now for three or four years." She said, "Didn't you know that?" And he didn't know it; he claimed he didn't, see.

But, as I said, that didn't make any difference anyway. Because I never did decide anything on the basis of politics.

DN: Right.

So, you wrote stories about the strikes and things going on in the area at the time? Or just what kind of stories did you report?

GOSNELL: Oh, I just went from that to . . . you know, all kinds of stories, whatever. And, of course, the more exciting, why the better it was.

DN. Accidents?

GOSNELL: Yeah. Probably the biggest story that I was ever on . . . well, there was one my hands were tied on that. I'll tell you about it later. But there was one on December 31, 1939. That was the big fire out here at Crown Hill 6 at Centenary. But there were 22 miners trapped in the coal mine there on New Year's Eve. That was a Saturday. And they didn't know if any of them were ever going to get out. But by the time they . . . before dawn they got all of them out but three. Three died trying to get their way out.

But I got calls from all over the world that night on . . . of course, by telephone. And I had a key to the Western Union office, and I went in and sent a little query to the editor of the Chicago Tribune over the telegraph. And so he came back and he -- while I held the key -- he came back. And he said, "Is Gosnell in there now?" And I said, "Yes." I didn't tell him I was Gosnell, I

GOSNELL: said, "yes." And he said, "Will you tell him to file anything he wants to about it?" And I believe he said up to a thousand words at a dollar . . . or a penny a word, he says. So, of course, it was all fudge. It wouldn't cost me anything.

DN: Um hm.

GOSNELL: And what he didn't know was that the editor of the Chicago Herald Examiner had said approximately the same thing only his price was three cents a word. (laughs)

DN: (joins in laughter)

GOSNELL: So, it got interesting 'fore it was over. I got a check all-told I think from the Herald-Examiner of 75 or 80 dollars, see.

DN: For that time it was very good money.

GOSNELL: Yeah.

DN: How did you learn to do the telegraph? Telegraphy?

GOSNELL: Well, I was mostly self-taught. There was a barber here in Clinton, Warren Bates. He and I got the bug about the same time, although I was first. He heard me and then he decided that he wanted to learn it. And you could call his wife. She's a resident of Clinton yet today, Margaret Bates. And she'd tell you the same story.

But we run a line between my store and his barber shop, and we would converse over that. If we were in doubt about something, you know, or we didn't understand this or that question, why one or the other of us would cross the street and get it straightened out, see. And that's the way we worked the bugs out of it.

DN: You had a book then and you read from a book on it?

GOSNELL: Oh, just a little book . . . just a little book with the code. It showed the letters, see.

DN: About what year was this when you first started learning?

GOSNELL: Well, that was . . . that was in 1927.

DN: Nineteen /hundred/ twenty-seven.

GOSNELL: And then in 1928, why I hired out to the railroad. I was ready to go to work before that, but then they had to have an excuse to hire me, see.

DN: Did they test you or anything to be sure that you knew how to do it?

GOSNELL: Well, they would rather you would show them, see, than to have this piece of paper that said you went to school.

DN: Uh-huh, right.

GOSNELL: And then after that . . .

DN: Experience.

GOSNELL: That's always been the rule on the railroad, see. Can you do the work? If you can do the work, why that takes the place of schooling. Takes the place of a diploma because you come up against things.

Well, the other big thing -- I'll tell you about that before your tape runs out -- was the big train wreck on September 14, 1944, at North Terre Haute. I was directly involved in that, see, and there was 29 people killed.

DN: Um hm. What happened?

GOSNELL: But I was not . . . Well, at first, of course, people thought that I might be the one responsible, see. But nobody was responsible except the crew on that southbound train. Why they didn't obey their orders, nobody knows.

DN: Can you describe the accident, what happened?

GOSNELL: Well, the southbound train . . . it was a troop train, and they were supposed to meet a northbound mail train at Atherton. They didn't stop at

GOSNELL: Atherton. They kept right on going. They went by Otter Creek junction. There was an operator at Otter Creek junction, and he reported this southbound train by. "Why," the dispatcher says, "you mean the northbound, don't you?" And he said, "No. No." He says, "It's southbound." The dispatcher says, "Why they're to meet No. 95 at Atherton." And his name was Frost; he said, "Well, that's what I thought." So the dispatcher rang Dewey (this is at 25th Street there and approximately Fort Harrison Road) and we heard him. We were on the phone, you know; we heard him. And Dewey answered and he says, "Is No. 90 by you yet?" "Yeah, just by." He says, "He's getting a yellow signal at the north end" -- which would have been Haythorne Avenue, see. So, we knew what the story was then. We were just waiting because there was no way . . . that southbound train was running 60 mile an hour. That was the speed they could go around the curve at Otter Creek junction. It was balanced, you see, for 60 mile an hour, and that was the speed they went around that.

DN: Uh-huh.

GOSNELL: So, there was no way that they could get control of that southbound train and get it stopped in just a little over two miles there, see. We knew that.

Well, in just about a minute's time why the telephone rattled and went dead. We knew good and well what had happened.

I started calling ambulances. I think I called 13 ambulances that morning before I stopped. I called everybody that I could find in the Terre Haute phone book.

DN: Um hm. Now, was there any way . . . did the train . . . were you able to notify him that he was going to collide?

GOSNELL: No!

DN: You couldn't . . .

GOSNELL: No.

DN: There was no way?

GOSNELL: No. No way, see. He passed the last phone that we could talk to him.

DN: How many people were injured? Do you remember?

GOSNELL: Oh, (sighs) everybody on the train that wasn't . . . wasn't killed had some kind of injury. I mean . . .

DN: Were they long trains at that time?

GOSNELL: Yeah.

DN: Many cars?

GOSNELL: Yeah. It had . . . oh, 700 or 800 people on it besides these soldiers. Now, the car that the soldiers was in, you know . . . well, just like this was the floor of the car. Up about this high (gestures) just above . . . or just under the windows on one side -- on the west side -- that railing was above the floor. Everywhere else above the floor on that car, the full length of it, nothing. It just cleaned everything out except that one sheet of steel on the west side, 70 feet long. And there was 24 . . . 24 soldiers -- 12 on a side, see -- sleeping there. And the three crew members . . . one of them . . . one of them was a porter. And I don't know who the others were, but there was the soldiers and three other persons. One of them that was killed was Fred Blair. He was the engineer. And, of course, when the locomotive hit, the boiler burst and that let out, you know, all this vast quantities of steam and hot water.

But it threw the engineer out in the ditch, and of course the hot water rushed out there, and it just boiled him. He didn't have a chance. Took him to the hospital. And they tried to talk to him a little bit at the hospital, but he thought . . . he saw this headlight. He thought it was a Pennsylvania train that had pulled out there in front of him, see.

DN: What time of day was this?

GOSNELL: It was a little after 3 in the morning.

But I gave 'em their orders right there. I

GOSNELL: was the last one to see 'em. They asked me . . . well, I went through four different investigations. And the one that the railroads conducted themselves . . . there were 13 people around the table and none of us got to hear what the others said, see.

DN: Right.

GOSNELL: We were ushered into the room and then questioned one by one; they went around the table. If they weren't satisfied /and/ they wanted to know more about it, why they went around again.

DN: Um hm.

GOSNELL: So . . . when it was all over, why the superintendent of the C. & E. I., which was my superintendent, he came over to me and shook my hand. And he says, "Well," he says, "you sounded like you knew what you were doing." He says, "I believe you did what you said you did." And he said, "I can't understand what happened. "But," he said, "you did what you could." And I said, "Yeah."

DN: In those times, did people sue?

GOSNELL: Hmm?

DN: In those times . . . in those days, did people sue other people . . . sue the railroad or anything like that?

GOSNELL: Yeah. There was one . . . these were all air men. Aviators. They had been conducting raids on places over in Europe as part of the war. And so they came back to Chicago. And then from Chicago they were being sent down to Florida for two or three weeks of rest and recreation, as they called it, see.

DN: Um hm.

GOSNELL: Of course, they never had a chance. They never knew what hit them. They were just killed outright.

But now two of those air men were twins and their family - I know this because I saw it in the paper -- there was members of the family /that/ sued the railroad for \$200,000 apiece and they got

GOSNELL: it. The others, I don't know what kind of settlement they got.

DN: Um hm. On one of the other interviews . . .

GOSNELL: But I know . . . I know from experience, because as a notary public I've gone a lot of times with a claim agent to make settlements in cases like that, see. And in most cases where the railroad makes someone an offer, if they accept the offer, they'll get more than if they go ahead and take it to court. That's been my experience. Because the railroad usually is pretty liberal.

That's never been solved, and I don't suppose it will be.

DN: They didn't go ahead and say that they were guilty?

GOSNELL: They just say they don't know what happened. Don't know why. Nobody knows.

DN: Could it have been that they didn't get your message? Or that your . . .

GOSNELL: Well, of course, that was one of their points that my testimony is about. Did they get the orders? I said, "Yeah." I said, you know [that] they put their orders on a stick . . .

END OF SIDE 1

TAPE 1-SIDE 2

DN: Do you want to begin by telling us how you give orders to the men on the train?

GOSNELL: Well, the orders are given over the telephone, of course. I tell you where . . . we had a telegraph as a back-up system, you see, in case the telephone went bad. But now in this particular case, there was not question that the orders were given because they had to be repeated back, see. In other words, they asked me, "Well, now, did you copy all the so-and so." When I said yes, [they said,] "Well, who repeated it first." Well, they'd ask me if I did or did someone else. But we had to give them the whole list through that, see. There's a definite order that you had to do that first. In

GOSNELL: other words, you had to take a look at the safety angle all the way through it, see.

So, they said . . . well, in a case like that on a locomotive as a rule, the fireman will be the one that comes across. If the station is on the engineer's side, why the fireman will come across to pick up the orders, see. So, that was the situation that existed there. "Well," I said, "I don't know. All I know is that someone wearing overalls and grayish-look cap," I said, "appeared in the gangway and stuck his arm out and got the orders." I said, "I didn't know either one of the men personally." I said, "As a rule I do know at least one of the men." "But," I said, "in this particular time, I didn't know either one." So, I said I didn't know whether it was the engineer or the fireman. "But," I said, "the man behind the throttle stayed there."

Well, they were . . . the same day that this happened -- only it was after dark that night -- that evening there was three F.B.I. men came to my house. They grilled me between two and three hours, and the angle that they used . . . you see there were two trains out of Chicago on the same schedule. The first one was the regular train out of Chicago. The second one was this troop train. Well, in Chicago . . . or in Danville, Illinois, the trains switched places. While the baggage handlers and all those who were taking care of the front-end work on this regular train -- the first train to get in town -- why the troop train showed up and they didn't have any work to do. So, they put them on around, see. Now, what the F.B.I. wanted to know was, was there any chance that anybody boarding that train in Danville and riding the blinds down to close to Clinton and then sticking their gun in the engineer's ribs and when he come to the stop sign, telling him to go on.

And I said, "Well, I don't see how they possibly could because," I said, "they came from Cayuga" (that was 23 miles away and I forget just exactly the time that they was in running it at 23 miles). But they came from Hillsdale to Clinton, which was nine miles, and they ran that in between six and seven minutes. Now, if they ran in six minutes,



GOSNELL: that's 90 miles an hour.

DN: Wow!

FOSNELL: So, they had to be on that engine and if they were able to stay on the engine, they were lucky, let alone being able to . . .

DN: That's not normal speed for that area, is it?

GOSNELL: Hmm?

DN: That wasn't normal speed, was it?

GOSNELL: Well, that was the dixie Flyer and I mean, there were places in their schedule that called for . . . every day called for 75 miles an hour in everyday runs.

DN: Even back in those years.

GOSNELL: Oh, yeah. Yeah. They were just as capable of doing it then as, well, they are today. I mean they could do it today. I think diesels came in at their . . . a little prematurely, myself. I think if they had put as much engineering know-how and hadn't gone off half-cocked, so to speak, I think they could have come up with a lot better diesels than the diesels are.

DN: It's surprising there weren't more accidents if the trains were going that rapidly through the countryside, than there were. Surely they were crossing a lot of paths or roads even if they were gravel roads.

GOSNELL: The only thing is that, now, a steam locomotive would not operate over the tracks that they have today. The track that they have today is up, down, all around. And a steam locomotive would not operate over that. It would be off the track, see.

DN: What kind of track did it have to have?

GOSNELL: Well, they had well-maintained track. Every man . . . every section foreman was responsible for four miles of tracks. But he was given what he needed to maintain that track. If he saw a bolt out, he was supposed to stop right then, put

GOSNELL: that bolt in, and tighten it up, see. Nowadays, they build a track, and then they expect it to go for three or four years before anybody even does anything to it. And they won't do it.

DN: Did trains tie up the traffic -- or trolley cars and interurbans and so forth -- in and out of Terre Haute in the county then as they do now?

GOSNELL: Now, how's that again?

DN: Were there so many trains that we had a lot of traffic jams in the county and in Terre Haute like they do now?

GOSNELL: Well, there were lots of trains, yeah. Like I said there at the beginning, they were shorter, see.

DN: How . . .

GOSNELL: And they ran faster.

DN: . . . what do you consider short?

GOSNELL: Well, forty to fifty, sixty cars. Nowadays, see, you may have . . . well, fifty is short but they may go up to a hundred and fifty, see.

DN: Um hm.

GOSNELL: But a diesel will go over bad track and stay on the track but a steam locomotive wouldn't. In other words, as long as they had steam locomotives they had to maintain the tracks, see.

DN: Right.

GOSNELL: That was the prime consideration. They had to. If they didn't, they couldn't operate. And so, they've just let the track go and because they've been saving money, they use it for other things and now they have to use diesel. They can't use anything else.

But a steam locomotive would put out three or four thousand horsepower at whatever speed you wanted to operate. Once it got started. The biggest fault with the steam locomotive was the fact that it was just . . . it would be just like operating

GOSNELL: an automobile all the time in high gear. It was hard to start, see. But once you got it started, why you had it made. But if you stopped, then you'd have trouble getting it started again. Now, the couplers on each car have three inches . . . three inches at each end. That's six inches of slack to a car. Well, with a steam locomotive what you do, you pick up a car at a time. See, you pick up six inches and then you move one more car. Then you go further ahead the length of the car, and you pick up another six inches of slack and you're pulling another car, see. You're just continually adding to the length of your train. In other words, the difference between a train with the slack all the way in and one with the slack all the way out might run into . . . between 100 and 200 feet, see. But you gotta . . . with a steam locomotive you had to pick that up. Now, that's where the jar came when you were riding a passenger train with a steam locomotive. They had to jerk it to start those first cars.

DN: Were they dirty? Was it dirty riding a train with the steam?

GOSNELL: Well, this . . .

DN: Passengers, you know.

GOSNELL: It was good, smooth riding after that. And I say, a steam locomotive could be designed to do practically anything you wanted to do if you could overcome that starting problem.

DN: Um hm. Now, did trains . . . they hauled freight and passengers both? Mail? . . . What else?

GOSNELL: You mean back then? Or now?

DN: Yeah. Back then.

GOSNELL: Well, no. Just on some small branch lines did they put passenger cars on the rear just for what they called accommodation, see. In other words, if you were going to . . . if you wanted to go to Evansville and somebody was around and wanted to go to Evansville, you'd say, "Well,

GOSNELL: that train's going to Evansville but we don't know when it'll get there. If you want to get on and take your chances of what time you're going to get there, why all right. Go ahead." See? But the passenger train that comes along next may beat it there. That's the way they operated.

DN: Did they haul coal mostly out of Terre Haute?

GOSNELL: Well, now the C. & E. I. did, yeah. The C. & E. I. operated . . . oh, about 40% of their traffic was coal. And, of course, the railroads are one of the mines' biggest customers, too.

DN: Um hm. Could that be why the C. & E. I. ran into trouble once they lost the coal business?

GOSNELL: Well, this diesel thing, of course, it's . . . has gone so far, see. I mean that that's irreversible. I mean that couldn't be stopped now, see.

But in World War II the C. & E. I. ran out of locomotives. A lot of roads did. Some had railroad . . . had engines to spare. I remember . . .

DN: They had so many . . . you mean they had so many trains going back and forth, they didn't have enough locomotives to pull them.

GOSNELL: Yeah. Yeah.

And now down here at Haley Tower now -- like where I was talking to you there about where I work -- now, I work just . . . I worked there just in the first of World War II. Then there was a job opening came in Clinton and so naturally I took that in preference you see. And then I didn't get back there until 1959. But, now, when I was there at the very beginning of World War II, we were handling on the average -- 24 hours around -- we were handling a movement across that crossing every six minutes.

DN. That's a lot of traffic!

GOSNELL: Sure it is!

DN: I'm surprised people could get from one end of town to another in Terre Haute.

GOSNELL: Well, like I say, there's a lot of 'em but they got out of there. They cleared, see. As soon as one went by, the cars that were standing there, they got busy and they cleared. By the time another one come, why everything was gone again, see. And that's the way it worked.

And it was the same way with trains. I came to work at Otter Creek junction one time on a Saturday morning, and there was a run from St. Louis to Detroit called the SD-2. It was supposed to run six days a week. Well, that train was at East Yard. That had to come out through North Terre Haute and go up through Rosedale and that way, see. And it had to cross the New York Central. Well, that train was ready right after I got to work at 7 o'clock, and when I left at 3 o'clock, that train had never gone. It had been there eight hours and had gone back for water once . . . gone back to the roundhouse to water once.

See, that's the kind of problems that you ran into during World War II, see. Well, now the way it worked out, the trains were coming so fast -- I mean so close together -- that when the C. & E. I. could handle it, the New York Central couldn't and vice versa, see. We couldn't find a clear spot on both railroads at the same time to get that train the three miles from Dewey out there at Haythorne Avenue out to Otter Creek junction.

DN: Did you share tracks then with the other trains?

GOSNELL: Yeah. There was just the one track.

DN: One track?

GOSNELL: Yeah.

DN: Was there much competition between the different trains in town? Or since they were each going in different directions, did it make any difference?

GOSNELL: Well, you had to . . . sometimes you had to stop a passenger train in order to let a freight move like that, that had to move, see. But the way it happened there, why we . . . all our passenger trains were gone. We didn't have any more until afternoon on the C. & E. I. But the New York Central

GOSNELL: did have a bunch of them around noon, see. And they just couldn't risk them.

DN: Um hm.

Can you tell us a little bit what your job as telegrapher was? What exactly did you do?

GOSNELL: Well, a telegrapher back then, his main job was taking care of the orders for train movements, and like that, from the train dispatcher. And he was supposed to stay within listening distance of this telegraph instrument, see, or the telephone, if he was handling the train orders by telephone. But anything else that came along that could be worked in with him, why he did. Now, at Clinton I sold passenger tickets on the train, see. . .

DN: Right.

GOSNELL: . . . from Clinton to wherever they wanted to go, things like that. And I handled the baggage. If nobody else was around and a train come in, why I might have to handle the U.S. mail before the train could get out of town, see. You just never knew how things would work out.

DN: Was the railroad unionized then?

GOSNELL: Oh, yeah.

DN: Railroad workers?

GOSNELL: Yeah. But around the depot you had . . . you had two main unions. You had the clerks' union and the telegraphers' union. And the telegrapher was responsible first to the train dispatcher. Then outside of that, why he could do anything clerical that a clerk could do, see.

DN: Um hm. How many railroad lines were there in . . . back in Terre Haute?

GOSNELL: Well, operating you mean?

DN: Operating.

GOSNELL: Well, of course, you had the Milwaukee Road and you had the New York Central and you had the

GOSNELL: Pennsylvania and what they called the Vandalia. Now, there was . . . there were two round trips a day between . . . now they carried U.S. mail between Terre Haute and South Bend. There were two round trips a day between . . . that carried mail between Terre Haute and Peoria. And there must have been six trains each way through Terre Haute between St. Louis and the east. As far as I know, they all of them possibly but two carried mail. And the C. & E. I. had six trains -- six passenger trains -- each direction and one solid mail and express train each direction. And believe it or not, there was three in the . . . around 1920 there were three round trips a day out of Sullivan, Indiana, on the Milwaukee Road to Terre Haute.

DN: Hm. People coming in here working? Or shopping?

GOSNELL: Well, just whatever the people would come for you know. Shopping trips or whatever. Maybe they was just going part way.

DN: What about coal mining trains?

GOSNELL: Coal mining trains?

DN: Uh-huh.

GOSNELL: What do you mean? The mines . . .

DN: The miners. Didn't they have trains on the railroads . . .

GOSNELL: Well, yeah.

DN: . . . that took the men to the . . .

GOSNELL: Now, here at Clinton we had four coal miners' trains that operated every day the coal mines worked, see.

DN: Now, were these on your railroad tracks, on the C. & E. I. railroad tracks, or did they have separate tracks?

GOSNELL: No, they were on the same tracks that the coal cars handled, the same tracks. Then (pause) there was . . . there was a little run -- most of the time I think it was from Maple Avenue in Terre

GOSNELL: Haute. You know, if you go through Twelve Points there just east on Maple Avenue about three blocks, there's two . . . well, there's a lumber yard up there. I forget what lumber yard it is, but there's a lumber yard that's on the Milwaukee Road. Now, that is the furthest south that that Milwaukee track came, see. When I was working in Haley Tower, if there was a Milwaukee engine came up there, I could see their headlight. See, I was a good half mile away, but I could see their headlight. Well, of course, they've taken that track out. But back in the heyday of the coal mines, that track was the starting point of a train to the mines across the river, see. And it operated every day that the coal mines operated.

DN: Now, has the number of employees changed over the years for the operation and maintenance of the railroads? Has it gone down?

GOSNELL: Oh, I'm sure it has. It was 800,000 country-wide when I was working ten years ago and I imagine it's about half that now. Maybe 600,000 now.

DN: When did they introduce automatic signals?

GOSNELL: Well, at different times. Now, the Pennsylvania for instance between Terre Haute and St. Louis, they didn't install them until about 1925. Maybe '26. They used manual block. In other words, they used three telegraphers around the clock, see. They kept the block office open. And they used the telegraph to communicate with one another and you didn't let a train go by you until you had gotten a clearance. [We could communicate with the C. & E.I. by radio but at that time no other railroad had radio equipment. As a safety feature, once a clear signal was given to a train, you were committed for four minutes. The track could not be taken away before that time expired.]

And out here west of West Terre Haute . . . I can't think of the name of that place now. Farrington. Did you ever hear of Farrington, Illinois?

DN: Right.

GOSNELL: Well, there was a railroad junction there that took off the main line and went to Peoria. And then they had operators there, telegraphers there. There was a man there, an operator by the name of Sebree. I rather think it was Shubert but I wouldn't swear



GOSNELL: to it. I wouldn't want to be quoted on it because I didn't know him. But he was . . . a man named Sebree was one of the operators there. /It was not Shubert Sebree.7

Well, then you had . . . going east on the Pennsylvania out of Terre Haute, you had the Vandalia line and they dropped south a ways into a place . . . a little place called Turner's. They called that the Old Line. Then they built a new line that by-passed Turner's altogether. And I mean if they haven't already done it, it's my understanding that they're going to abandon that whole line from Terre Haute to Avon yard through Greencastle. They're going to abandon that. That's one of the sections that they aim to abandon.

DN: What do you think caused the decline in the use of railroads?

GOSNELL: Well, one of the main things is that railroads run their trains, you might say, mostly at their convenience. You see a shipper has a carload of something, and the railroads won't move that car until they have a number of cars going in that same direction at the same time, see. That's the only way they can economically handle it. And that car may stand there 24 hours before it moves.

DN: This wasn't true in the beginning though, was it?

GOSNELL: No. No.

DN: Could you see when the decline was beginning? When people . . .

GOSNELL: Of course, it's the truckers, you see, that's causing the decline, because it boils down to private trucking, see. That's what it amounts to because of the private trucker will back up to the door of the shipper and whenever he has a shipment ready to move, he'll move it for them, see. And he'll get it on the highway and he'll get it on the road. And, of course, it's . . . that's for a consideration. But that consideration, if a shipper wants it done, why it will be moved. Even then it's worth the price possibly or the man wouldn't pay it, see.

DN:                So you . . .

GOSNELL:          That's what it boils down to.

DN:                . . . that as soon as trucking began, another  
means of moving freight and so forth, the trains . . .

GOSNELL:          Well, you might say what brought the issue to  
a head was the building of the interstate highways,  
you see. Now, the people who drive passenger cars  
like to think that interstates were built for them,  
see. But they weren't. They were built for the  
trucks. And they're not . . . they were built,  
well, some possibly under the guise of defense of  
the country. But most of them their clearances are  
too low to really take any big guns or anything like  
that under them. They won't do it, see. Can't get  
anything very big under them.

DN:                What happened to all the employees that were  
laid off the railroad? Do you have any idea?

GOSNELL:          Well, on some of the railroads, some of the  
railroads paid the employees severance pay to get  
them to retire early. That's the way they took  
care of some of them. Others, I don't know, don't  
know what happened to them.

DN:                Do you think there's any future for the rail-  
roads?

GOSNELL:          Oh, yeah!

DN:                Doing what?

GOSNELL:          I don't see how we could get along without the  
railroads. Even if we have another war, I don't  
see how we could get along without them. Because  
it . . . the railroad is the cheapest way of moving  
materials, especially heavy loads. I'm talking about  
heavy loads. There's loads so heavy that are going  
down the interstate roads now that years ago wouldn't  
even be allowed down the railroad, even though the  
railroad was designed for loads like that. But they  
were too big to go down the railroad then, and they're  
almost too big to go down them now. And still they're  
going down the highway.

DN: Um hm. Ruining our highways.

GOSNELL: Yeah. And you and I are going to pay for it. Sooner or later it's going to break down the inter-states.

DN: Is there any way to keep trains from clogging up traffic in a city, really?

GOSNELL: Well, we used to apply this down there at Haley Tower as much as we possibly could. We would tell the train that if it looked like there was going to be a conflict there, we'd say, "Well now, take it easy. We've got so-and-so that's going to be here at such-and-such a time and we can't handle you 'til then." See? "Well," /they would say/ "when do you think the crossing will be clear?" I'd laugh and I'd give them a figure, you know. And usually I wouldn't miss it over a minute or two, see. But something breaks down or somebody stops a train for something, maybe something happens, see. Even just a couple walking across the track could stop a train. I've had that happen. I've had a couple disappear from view, and I had a train just right at 'em, see. Well, the engineer'd see it and he'd do what they call "big hole" that train. He'd set the air, see -- the emergency air -- to keep from hittin' that couple.

I saw it happen there at Beech Street one day. A man and his wife . . . it was so close that the man gave his wife a shove. And after that, the train came between me and them. I couldn't see what happened. You know it wasn't 30 minutes until they were back there coming back the other way.

DN: Hmum. Well, I know it's getting late so . . .

GOSNELL: But it stops the train, and it takes five minutes to pump that air back up, see.

DN: So, trains really can't help but get off schedule occasionally?

GOSNELL: Well, they do everything they can but you just can't turn around on a dime. You can't stop them on a dime. You can't start them just when you get ready to. Now, everybody's aware of that problem,

GOSNELL: but if you were up in a tower like I was or if you would ride in the cab of a locomotive and see what the engineer goes through, you'd have some gray hairs.

DN: (laughs) Probably would!

Well, thank you very much for having this interview with us. We appreciate it.

GOSNELL: Well, you're welcome.

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